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ABSTRACT

The topic of illiteracy in the United States is discussed by five people in this transcript of "Options on Education." These five, each of whom approaches illiteracy in a different way, are George Weber, Associate Director of the Council for Basic Education; Mike Smith, Director for Essential Skills of the National Institute of Education; J. Glenn Beall, United States Senator and cosponsor of a new National Reading Improvement Program; Ruth Love Holloway, Director of Right to Read; and Jeanne Chall, professor in the Harvard Graduate School of Education and author of "Learning to Read: the Great Debate." Topics discussed include basic and functional illiteracy, when and how (whole word and phonics approaches) reading is taught, automatic decoding, motivation for reading, the Right to Read project, the money spent by federal reading programs, the use by schools of textbooks and other reading materials, and ways in which parents can determine whether children are having reading difficulties. (JM)

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"ILLITERACY IN THE UNITED STATES"

A Transcript of "Options on Education"
September 25, 1974

THE
GEORGE
WASHINGTON
UNIVERSITY

Key
M: Moderator
GW: George Weber, Council for Basic Education
MS: Marshall "Mike" Smith, Nat'l Institute of Education
RH: Ruth Love Holloway, Right to Read, USOE
GB: J. Glenn Beall, U.S. Senator (R-Md.)
JC: Jeanne Chall, Harvard Graduate School of Education

M: From National Public Radio in Washington. This is "Options on Education"

GW: Now we are getting down to the nuts and bolts in the elementary school, which is very important, because even though a child in the ninth and tenth grade can decode laboriously simple words, he has lost a tremendous amount. I mean, this child should have learned this by the end of third grade. He has been hitting his head against the stone wall for six years.

M: That was George Weber. His statement suggests the importance of our topic, which is Illiteracy in the United States. How many Americans cannot read well enough to fill out a job application or take a bus across town? How wide spread and how serious are reading problems in the Public Schools? And is there one best way to teach beginning reading? The five people you will hear on this program approach the problem of illiteracy in different ways. George Weber, whose voice you just heard, is Associate Director of the Council for Basic Education. Mike Smith is Director for the Essential Skills of the National Institute of Education. Later you will hear from United States Senator J. Glenn Beall, co-sponsor of a new National Reading Improvement Program, Dr. Ruth Love Holloway, Director of the Right to Read in the U.S. Office of Education, and Dr. Jeanne Chall, the Harvard Professor and author of Learning to Read: the Great Debate. I began by asking George Weber and Mike Smith for working definitions of two terms, basic literacy and functional literacy.

MS: I guess my sense is that the use of the terms is a real disarray. The notion of basic literacy has generally been described by the government, by the Census Bureau, and by world governments as, giving children the chance to decode information, to take strings of words and turn them into spoken language.

M: That's basic literacy. What's functional literacy.

MS: Now functional literacy really attacks the notion of whether or not children can deal with society, whether or not children and adults can deal with society. Whether or not they can look at the kinds of printed materials that are necessary for them to deal successfully, to cope...

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M: That didn't sound like a useful distinction.

MS: Yes, I think it is. We'll take the distinction just between being able to read something out loud and being able to understand something. I think that's what you really get down to. Functional literacy says something about the relation of reading to the society, and not just the relationship of reading to understanding something like Plato.

GW: I think the other problem is the U.S. Government and foreign governments have defined literacy historically in ways that today are not useful in the United States. One of the ways is just the Census Bureau simply asks people whether they can read and write. Well, since very few people don't want to say they can't read or write, if they can even sign their name they are recorded by the Census Bureau as literates.

MS: The Census problem is even more gross than that.

GW: Yes, all of the census data is worthless.

MS: They ask whether or not you can read or write a simple message. They don't ask you to perform that. They just ask you that simple question.

M: Well, our concern, then, it seems to me, ought to be with functional literacy.

MS: That's correct.

SOME STATISTICS ON ILLITERACY

M: Let's get some figures out on the table. What percentage of the American people as a whole are not functionally literate?

MS: That's an impossible question to answer right now. We have no good measure of functional literacy. We have the beginning of some measures. Let me give just quick numbers and perhaps George has some more to add. A recent Roper poll estimates that about eighteen million adults--people over the age of sixteen--cannot read well enough to file applications for Medicaid, Social Security benefits, bank loans or drivers licenses. That's a very limited definition of functional literacy, but it is a beginning. It tells us something about needs of society versus the kinds of skills that children and that adults have.

GW: This is a minimum functional literacy in the United States today. That's what that figure relates to and it is a good ball park figure. It's about 15 percent more or less, or it could be as high as 20; it could be a few points lower, but I think if you realize that it is not an exact figure. About 15 percent of adults are handicapped.

M: I don't want to get in the position of having said there are no good figures and then putting out some figures as if there are concrete.

GW: The 15 percent is a good figure, in my opinion. I guess I disagree with Mike somewhat here, because when this question has been studied in the last ten years in about six different ways, you always come down to about 15, 16 percent in this field, somewhere between, say, thirteen and twenty percent. We had three successive U.S. Commissioners of Education refer to reading as the number one problem in education, and that goes back ten years. We have a federal program that was the most important program started by Commissioner James Allen, The Right to Read program, which was premised on this, and we had his successor, Dr. Sidney Marland, saying that educators should be ashamed of the low achievement in reading. The new Commissioner, Dr. Ted Bell, has said that it is probably the number one problem in education today.

M: Let me ask another question. Given that roughly fifteen percent of adult americans are functionally illiterate, do we know how to teach people how to read?

MS: I think George and I might disagree on that. I believe, as he does I think, that we know how to teach children how to decode. We know how to teach people how to decide, how to sound out words. I don't believe that we really know very well about how to teach people how to understand what they are reading. I think that's done generally in a very ad hoc way, that children themselves pick those skills up incidental to the course of instruction within school.

GW: I would agree. One of the problems here is defining what we mean by reading. Now there are lots of different definitions of reading, and reading at the outset is a matter of what might be referred to as decoding: Recognizing that combinations of letters on the page represent sounds and words that the child is already familiar with. The further you get up in school in what is called reading, the closer you get to logic, to information, to the content of what you are reading about. Fundamentally, there are two different ways to teach reading. One is the beginning reading approach that is still used in the majority of cases and has been for three or four decades. And that is what might be called the "whole word" approach, in which the child is taught to recognize words as wholes. A flash card D-O-G is put in front of the child, and the child is asked "what is this word?" And the child responds "dog" because earlier he was shown D-O-G as a whole and this word is "dog," without any training that "dog" is really pronounced that way because it is a combination of three letters which stand for three sounds. The other approach is to start from the beginning with the fact that letters and letter combinations do symbolize sound, which the children have already learned and are using in their speech and in their listening.

MS: Really, George you are talking about the move toward systematic phonics, not just incidental phonics, but most teachers used a phonics approach along with the whole word approach while they were teaching reading even fifteen years ago.

GW: I wouldn't agree with that. I would say that fundamentally you have to have one approach or the other as your fundamental organizing strategy and pedagogical strategy. Whether a child or a class or a school is using one approach or another, to someone who knows what he is doing is very easily identifiable and recognizable.

M: Now George is trying to put you into an either-or corner. Now if you are willing to be forced into....

MS: If you look at Jeanne Chall's Learning to Read: The Great Debate, you will find that she cites over and over the fact that in most cases both the whole word approach and the phonics approach are used. And it makes a lot of sense. Clearly the whole word approach has tremendous problems. If you are trying to teach a child a sight vocabulary of two thousand words, they must remember those configurations for all two thousand words. If you can give them some phonics along with it they can break that down to a far far fewer number of letter-sound correspondences, and then sound out the words with it. I think what has happened in the last ten years, at least ever since Why Johnny Can't Read and Jeanne Chall's book, systematic phonics has come much more into play.

M: We began talking about adult functional literacy, but we have switched to talking about how reading is taught in schools. How serious a problem of functional illiteracy do we have in our public schools?

WHEN IS READING TAUGHT?

GW: One way of looking at it is this. Our public school curriculum typically teaches the mechanics of reading, beginning reading, only for three grades, that is, only through grade three. And after that it does other things with respect to reading. It tries to broaden vocabulary. It words on various content areas, but it generally drops teaching the mechanics of reading after the third grade. This is very important, because many of our children haven't mastered that by the end of third grade, and after that they are very frustrated because they are not getting help in learning how to read.

MS: I also believe as George does that a large number of children do not learn the mechanics of reading during the time when they are expected to, in the first three grades of school, and they need more work beyond that. I also think there are other problems though. I believe that we do not know at this point how to go about alerting children to the purpose of reading, to why they are reading certain passages, to what kinds of information they should extract from those passages, and to the strategies or tactics that they might use to extract the meaning from particular sentences and from the paragraphs.

GW: I would agree with [illegible] that. Those are the kinds of reading skills that are appropriate and are taught in some schools once a child has mastered the mechanics of reading. Once he knows what I call the mechanics of reading or beginning reading, he can read any word that he knows by ear in isolation, and he knows that the words are organized left to right on a page. We adults take all of this for granted, but you have to learn

this. The fact that they are organized in sentences, the fact that the letters separated by space means individual words. Again, we take all this for granted. The new reader has to learn all of these things: periods, question-marks, explanation points, semicolon, all that business is just mechanics of reading. Now once he masters the mechanics of reading, if he ever does, there still are lots of things to learn about reading, as Mike has pointed out, in terms of analyses, in terms of the complex questions of syntax and organization of materials that you are reading, etc.

M: So there are two areas then that need to be taught: the one is the comprehension which Mike was referring to earlier, the first is the mechanics. Do you agree that we do know how to teach the mechanics?

GW: I think we know far more about how to teach the mechanics than we are now applying, but we are improving everyday, because we are overcoming a wrong approach that we have used for three or four decades.

M: As we shift to phonics, we are getting better, is that what you are saying?

GW: That's correct.

AUTOMATIC DECODING

M: Mike, do you argue with that?

MS: No, I don't argue with that at all. I do believe that there is another step though, which is an important step, and almost a psychological step. There are many children who can decode laboriously, who can sit down, take a printed page, take the words on the printed page, and work through them. There is another stage though, I think, in decoding, and that is the stage that most literate adults just take for granted. And let's call it somethink like automatic decoding. Most adults can sit down and just automatically decode what is on the page. They may not understand it; it may be a physics text with words they just have no conception of, but they automatically sit down and just read. Now you will notice that if you think about it, if you have anything in front of you and if you have an idle moment you will sit down and just let your eyes roam over it, and you will pick up words. You are automatically decoding. They may go in the eyes and out of the head. You may not understand a word on that page, but you are automatically decoding. So I think this is a stage that skilled readers have to reach. It is very necessary. And you may only get to through practice. I don't think we really know a great deal about it right now.

M: So there are three steps; there is decoding, there is the learning of the automatic process and the polishing of it. And then there is the comprehension. Obviously they are probably not separable, but there are three things that people need to learn. I can imagine our audience saying, "hey, where are the numbers? The guy asked how serious the problem is in the public school and nobody has been specific."

GW: Well, I can be very specific. At the end of third grade my own estimate is that nationwide that fifteen percent of our children in the public school at the end of the third for all practical purposes cannot read at all. Cannot read at all. I'm not saying that they can't read a few words that they have seen thousands of times and memorized as wholes. But if you give them a simple sentence which does not have those words in it, but instead words which they know very well by ear and even speak themselves, they will be unable to read it. I have done this with thousands of children. But don't expect to go to your neighborhood school and find fifteen percent, because if you live in an affluent suburb with college graduate parents it runs about 0-1 percent; probably by third grade 0 percent because those who haven't been able to learn to read by that time have been sent to special schools or clinics. In the inner city it will run from 35 to 50 percent.

M: Mike, do you agree with those figures?

MS: I think George is operating more on a feeling. He has simply looked at lots and lots of schools. I don't know of any good accurate estimates that have come from standardized testing or any other kind of testing that would really allow us to pinpoint those figures. Let me give you an example. One of the things that we have kicked around at the National Institute of Education has been by six grade what percentage of kids cannot decode, cannot go from those letters, those squiggles on the page, to the sounds. We looked long and hard for that data, and it just doesn't seem to exist. It is clearly a critical question, because it has tremendous policy implications for inner-city school, for rural areas where there is great poverty, and for areas where the children aren't learning how to read. But the data doesn't exist. They exist, I think, in estimates of the sort that George is making. There are people who believe the opposite of that. Jeanne Chall at Harvard, for instance, argues that by fifth or sixth grade that most children know how to decode, not decode fluently or automatically the way we talked about earlier, but they can decode, they can sound it out however laboriously.

THE "NUTS & BOLTS"

GW: Well, now we are getting down to nuts and bolts in the elementary school, which is very important, because even though a child in the ninth grade and tenth grade can decode laboriously simple words, he has lost a tremendous amount. This child should have learned this by the end of third grade. He has been hitting his head against the stone wall for six years. He has been labeled a remedial reading case. He has been unable to keep up with his classmates, in all the subjects which depend on reading, and this child in ninth grade decoding laboriously is not the child he was at the second grade laboriously decoding. He is in a bad way, and we have lots of these children in a bad way. So the fact he ultimately learns to decode doesn't solve the problem.

MS: I am glad we agree on that, because then I believe that in order to get to automatic decoding, to get to the comprehension levels and ultimately to something like functional literacy (however you would wish to define it) the child has to have a purpose for reading; he has to know why he should read, and a lot of children at this point really don't know why they should read. They watch

television a lot, they communicate verbally and orally with their peers with and their adult models, with parents, and with teachers, but they don't really see the purpose of reading. So you are moving into something that more than just teaching of skills in the narrow sense. You have moved into the area of motivation.

GW: I wouldn't disagree with Mike that there are problems of motivation and understanding and purpose involved in reading at the higher levels. What I am saying is that we aren't going to get to that unless we achieve better teaching of the mechanics of reading than we are doing now.

MS: Particularly now where twenty two states have accountability mechanisms built in by the legislation into the teaching of reading (and some of them are even beginning to implement them). We are talking about little tiny objectives with regard to reading that teachers will be held accountable for. For instance, whether or not a child can blend two letters together. It may be that we are losing the forest for the trees, with all these tests. It may be that child himself does not really understand the purpose of putting together all these letter-sound correspondences or these combination of letter-sound correspondences. It may be that in early grades and particularly in the later grades they don't understand the purpose of reading.

GW: I would disagree with this completely, if Mike means that many first grade children don't want to know how to read. I would disagree completely. I never met one. I never met a first grade child who didn't want to know how to read. Now, when one gets to be a fifth grader who can't read, then a normal psychological reaction is that "I can't do it so it is not important." But that is an entirely different ball game. Once a child learns the mechanics of reading, how much he does read is affected by what purposes he sees, what the environment and his needs indicate to him, under what circumstances he should read. So that we find that children who can read have purposes of their own, varying purposes and varying degrees of purposes for reading. If a child's interest is in sports, every daily newspaper has pages of this stuff that he will be interested in reading, if he can read.

M: So you are saying that there are enough natural stimuli in the environment to, so that kids in the first grade want to read. It is a matter of learning the mechanics.

GW: Absolutely.

MS: No, I believe that is completely right. Children when they enter school really want to learn how to read. They have seen other people read. It is a mystical thing for them.

GW: In fact, going to school is almost synonymous with learning to read.

MS: There may be small groups of children around the country who are not motivated strongly when they enter first grade, but I think that is not the point so much. The point really is, what's the

relationship between these letter-sound correspondences and these combinations of letters and the sounds, and then laboriously sounding out all of these and taking tests? In some instances now when we are getting into the accountability mechanisms, they are taking tests weekly. What is the relationship between that and extracting meaning?

GW: I think this is a different question. Whether taking tests every week is connected with any reasonable school activity is quite another matter. It is not reading. You don't have to take a test every week to teach reading well. A lot of these schemes are hair brained.

A "HAIRBRAINED SCHEME"?

M: Well, let's talk about that. That is an interesting transition. In an earlier conversation you used that same adjective "hairbrained" to describe a new Federal program for putting reading specialists in demonstration schools around the country for grades one and two and for kids with reading problems for grade three. Why do you say that is a "hairbrained scheme?"

GW: Well, you may be putting words in my mouth. I would have to look at a particular program specifically before I would comment. I would say this: Any program which pretends that somehow or other we can get four or five times the number of reading specialists that we now have, over night, is not realistic.

M: But would it be helpful to have those reading specialists in the classroom around country?

GW: It would be helpful for anybody teaching reading to be able to do it better. One of the fundamental problems in reading instructions today is that so many of the people who are doing, and have to do it because it is part of their job as second grade teacher, don't know much about it and are not very good at it.

M: Well, now the Right to Read program has set as its goal 99% literacy by 1980. Is that an achieveable goal?

GW: It is not an achieveable goal.

M: Why not?

GW: It would assume much greater progress in this area than we are making.

MS: I don't believe that is exactly accurate, John, I believe the goal is 99% of school age children over the age fourteen but still school age. It is 90% for all adults.

M: Is that an achieveable goal?

GW: That is achieveable.

MS: I don't believe that we are moving that way. The figures just don't pay off. If you look at the Right to Read program, they have had a stable funding of 12 million dollars for the last two and a half years. Now 12 million dollars for the prime problem in American education is a drop in the bucket, that is not to say that there aren't a lot of other moneys from the

federal government going into reading, but they are are not going into the Right to Read program, and they are not going into concerted effort to overcome the kinds of literacy problems that we have been talking about.

RIGHT TO READ

M: Let's hear more about the Right to Read program from Director Ruth Love Holloway and about the new--and so far penniless--National Reading Improvement Program from Senator J. Glenn Beall, who is a Republican from Maryland.

RH: Right to Read is a national campaign to eliminate illiteracy. It was established by late Commissioner of Education James Allen who was appalled at the reading problems both with children and adults. Because it was such an enormous problem, he established Right to Read as an effort to eliminate illiteracy in a ten year period, between the years of 1970-1980. So we have set about trying to develop a campaign that involves both government and the private sector, in the effort to improve reading and eliminate illiteracy. As you no doubt are aware, there are some seven million elementary and secondary school children who have severe reading problems and are considered potentially functionally illiterate. Additionally there are some eighteen and a half million adults over the age of sixteen who have problems.

M: Now, is Right to Read aimed at both children and adults?

RH: Yes, Right to Read efforts involve both preschool and adults, as well as teacher education.

M: Tell us about some of the efforts. What does Right to Read do?

RH: Right to Read funds demonstration programs for the purpose of testing out certain concepts and theories in the teaching of reading, such as whether or not the school administrator makes a major difference when that person becomes the program director, as opposed to an external person, or utilizing reading specialists to help other teachers in the classroom do a better job. Those are some of the kinds of things. We fund those only for a limited period of time.

M: If you find out something works, what do you do? Tell the world?

RH: Yes, we do indeed tell the world. We then fund state departments of education, and these strategies operate simultaneously. We fund state education agencies to pick up many of the concepts that have been tested out, proven in the demonstration programs. They have developed a multiplier effect program, in which state agencies train local Right to Read coordinators from around their state who go back to their district after 240 hours of training and become the coordinator of reading, regardless of source of funds. So this person plays a very valuable role in the local district. In addition, Right to Read funds national impact programs which are designed to get massive numbers of people involved in helping or receiving help. An example would be our funding of the development of a television series for adults over the age of sixteen. It's a video-taped package; unlike Sesame Street, it's a program that can be decentralized and given to television channels to operate, or they can be used in adult basic education centers or what have you.

M: So Right to Read is functioning as a catalytic agent.

RH: Yes, indeed.

M: Now, I notice in the literature that 31 states are called Right to Read states. What does that mean?

RH: To become a Right to Read state, the Commissioner of Education in a particular state joins into an agreement with me and the Office of Education, specifically with the Right to Read office, that he or she will perform certain kinds of services and that we on the other hand will also deliver certain kinds of services. It is a joint agreement. One of the things that they agree to do is to develop a comprehensive plan, state-wide, to eliminate illiteracy within a period of time, and we know that involves correcting the existing problem as well as doing something in the schools to prevent reading problems from occuring. They also agree to look at teacher certification, and to revise and restructure the way teachers are certified within their particular state.

M: Let me ask you why 19 states are not Right to Read states.

RH: It is simply a matter of money.

A NATIONAL READING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

M: Let me switch over now and ask Senator Beall about another federal effort, a new piece of legislation that he co-sponsored with Senator Thomas Eagleton. Would you describe the bill for us?

GB: Yes I will. What we have is a combination of two bills, one introduced by Senator Eagleton, the other introduced by me. And this is what generally happens when two people come up with programs on the same subject and are interested in accomplishing their objectives. In order to marshall support for both, we joined together and combined what we thought were the better features of each bill. The purpose of our bill is to provide financial assistance to encourage the states and local education agencies to undertake projects that will strengthen the reading programs in the elementary grades. A second purpose is to give them financial assistance to develop a program that will strengthen instructional techniques used in the teaching of reading and the training of teachers.

M: Let's separate those and talk about how the bill would help strengthen ...

GB: The bill is divided basically in three sections. First of all, there is the Eagleton section, which is the general improvement section of the bill; that would provide funds to the local educational agency so that they could carry out demonstration projects that show promise for developing ways to overcome reading deficiencies; it authorizes in addition to demonstration projects for the schools, pre-school programs as well. Secondly, it authorizes a state reading improvement

program where we would give money to the states to help them develop programs and do research on the subject of reading. Now it is interesting to note that we aren't going to do any of this until we have authorized or appropriated thirty million dollars to be spent under the first section of the demonstration part of the program. The reason, of course, is that there is some jealousy, as you know, between state agencies and local agencies. We put the local agencies first, because we thought that's where the education function is implemented and where the administration takes place. The state agencies generally are supervisory and so we help them exercise a supervisory roll, but only after we have given a pretty good dose to the people at the local level. Third, we have the special emphasis project, and this is my provision. This is where we would fund school districts to carry out specific demonstrations that would be designed to determine whether the employment of the reading specialist or whether more intensive instruction in reading can bring about improvement in reading performance. We think the reading specialist supplements the classroom teacher. We think the classroom teacher obviously has the responsibility for teaching the children. Assuming that the classroom teacher doesn't in all cases now have the kind of training and techniques that are available, the reading specialist will supplement the classroom teacher. Basically it's the classroom teacher that gets to get the job done. But we have to supplement that teacher with the specialist right now, and at the same time try to upgrade the training of the person who is in the classroom.

M: Dr Holloway, the methods and the techniques that you have been finding and recommending to the rest of the country -- are many of them phonics methods of teaching reading?

RH: Right to Read as a program doesn't promote any one particular reading or instructional approach, but we have found that, as most reading people know, that reading programs involve phonics as well as comprehension and a variety of other kinds of skills. We have not found any one approach more effective than another. What we have found is that it is the knowledge and the skills of the teacher utilizing the particular reading approach that seems to make the difference.

M: Are you saying that given a skilled teacher, it would not matter whether that teacher used a "whole word" method or a "phonics" method?

RH: We have not found that it is "either/or" in the programs we have funded. We have found that the whole word aspect and the phonics aspect are part of the total reading programs. We have not found "either/or" in any of our reading programs. What I am saying is that a teacher who understands the particular approach that he or she happens to be using makes the greatest difference. It really is not an "either/or" situation.

M: How about personally. Do you have a personal preference in the debate between phonics and the whole word?

RH: I think that is one of the dichotomies education cannot afford. I simply think that we ought to be about the business of finding what works best with children and implementing that. Of course, as a classroom teacher, I used multiple kinds of approaches with children, and the key to it always was motivating children to read, and then finding the particular method that worked best for the individual child. And I still think that holds.

M: That was Dr. Ruth Love Holloway of Right to Read. Senator Beall went on to voice doubts about the prospects for funding the National Reading Improvement Program, but if the Congress does provide money, the new program will be administered by Right to Read. Getting back to my conversation with Mike Smith of the National Institute of Education and George Weber of the Council for Basic Education, I asked Mike Smith about the Right to Read program, specifically would he be happier if that program put more emphasis on phonics in the teaching of beginning reading?

AN ECLECTIC APPROACH

MS: That's a tough question. I believe that they have taken a somewhat eclectic approach. They have tried to push methods they believe are working, and they have tried to distribute and disseminate information about those particular programs.

GW: I think federal programs have already been spending billions of dollars on reading for nine years, with very little effect. And so when you are talking about a $12 million program having an effect, you are letting the cat out of the bag in this way: it may be a program that costs very <u>little</u> on the part of the federal government that has the <u>most</u> effect. If the federal government could say that reading specialists have agreed for ten years that a phonics approach is better than a whole word approach, why don't we agree, why don't we tell the public that we have recognized that. The Chall book was published severn years ago. The experts in reading, the ones without a vested interest in old whole word series of readers, all agree that we need a great deal more emphasis on phonics than we have had in the past. The federal government doesn't say that, though.

MS: I do agree with George that we have spent a fortune, and we can't look at the results and say "here is what we have accomplished over the last ten years." Evaluations over and over, as you know, have given us little encouragement about the ways that the federal government intervened. The answer is tough. I guess I do believe that we should strongly emphasize the general scientific opinion that the systematic phonics approach is a much more efficient and effective way of teaching early reading. This problem in some ways is settled. We have got an immense amount of evidence in the early grades, and it turns more into a dissemination problem, a propaganda problem almost.

GW: This is an extremely important point. I agree with Mike here. The questions of whether generally speaking the phonics approach or whole word approach is a superior method of teaching beginning reading has among the technicians and the experts been virtually settled. But we are still using it. I would guess that about 85% of our primary grade classrooms are still using a whole word approach as the fundamental method. I am not saying that they haven't tacked on some supplemental material, but if you look at the basic textbook, they still go back to a period when they were using the whole word exclusively and therefore they are shot through with things that are based on a whole word approach. That is hard to explain to a layman because it takes a lot of explanation.

M: Now, if in fact most people would agree, or most experts would agree that the phonics approach is superiod, aren't you getting close to saying that the federal government is being irresponsible if it does not push that?

GW: I don't like these single word categorizations. The federal government in this whole field has been very inefficient and lazy and has, I would say for political reasons, played along with the establishment for decades. This is the reason why the federal government still disseminates materials which say that the whole word approach is the correct one.

M: You're saying "lazy" and "cozy", but not "irresponsible".

TIME & MONEY

MS: If you look at the amount of time it takes to put materials on the market and to disseminate those materials by private publishers, there is generally a seven or eight years since the Chall book came out, and since then there has been a national consensus or at least a tendency toward systematic phonics approaches. I think you will find in the new reading series that they are moving away from the whole word to a great extent. If you look at the publishing figures, over the past eight years the major four publishers have dropped in their percentage of the market from 90% to 50%. A lot of that is because towns, cities, and local districts are picking up on newer series.

M: The implication is that there is an economic reason, based on the interest of the publishers and the school systems that keeps systems using textbooks that they bought, no matter what.

MS: Of course.

GW: Of course. It costs money to buy textbooks.

M: It is not quite a conspiracy, but it at least is economic willingness.

GW: Words like that will be misunderstood by the public. The natural interests of various groups which aggravate the problem of change and lessen its speed.

MS: Let me just make one more point. I believe we have skirted around what is really the critical problem and that is really an equality of opportunity problem. The problem with reading now lies with economically disadvantaged populations. The children in the inner-city who are poor, the children in rural areas who are poor, those are the children who are not learning how to read, as we have defined reading. That is a somewhat different problem than talking (as we have talked) about automatic decoding and comprehension. We are now really talking about opportunity for people in society, and my sense about this particular problem is that the nation really has an obligation to push to try to get people up to a certain level where they are functionally literate, and then define functional illiteracy in an opportunity sense, and see that those people have an opportunity to move into different kinds of jobs, into lots of different kinds of jobs. Perhaps everyone can't become a medical doctor or a lawyer, but the ninety percent of the opportunities or occupation in the country don't require a reading level of even twelfth grade. The required reading level is, in the best estimate, around the eighth grade but we are still missing that for an awful lot of kids in the inner-city and in some rural areas. That is really the national problem and it's an opportunity problem. I think then once we overcome that problem we can go on. An affluent society should go on. It should have reading for pleasure, it should have reading for all sorts of other purposes, but the first, principal issue right now is really the opportunity issue.

GW: I wouldn't disagree with any of that. In fact, if the kids in the suburbs read as poorly and did as badly in learning to read as the children in the inner-city, the suburban schools would have been torn down a long time ago. I would disagree very much about the significance of the federal Right to Read Program being given over only $12 million. We spend more money on reading than on any other subject in the school. One can't equate one federal program with our efforts in reading. We spend billions of dollars on reading, and we spend more on reading than any other subject.

M: Let's talk quickly on how we spend that money. We do it through a $12 million Right to Read Program. How else do we spend federal money or other money on reading?

MS: There is an estimate that we spend at least half a billion in Title I programs on reading, that is, on compensatory education programs targeted at disadvantaged children in the schools. Most of that money is spent in the first three grades of school, following certain guidelines that we laid down about three years ago. I think George is really talking about massive amounts of money spent by the local districts all over the country. Reading is the principal aim of most schools in the first three years, and in many schools for the first six years. And the resources that are expended there are enormous, just enormous.

GW: 92% of our public school money comes from state and local forces, and the money devoted to reading from those sources just dwarfs anything the federal government does in this field. The federal government did nothing until 1965 in this field, and actually if the federal government decided on a new billion dollar a year program in reading tomorrow, it would have a minor effect financially, compared to what the schools are already spending on this, because the schools already may be spending ten billion a year on reading.

MS: But of course it is the way the money is used by the federal government that is important, and it is whether or not the federal government can leverage on the money that is raised by the local districts.

M: There are two basic approaches to the teaching reading, the whole word or meaning emphasis and the phonics or code emphasis approach. Phonics works better, Smith and Weber have said, but since most commercially available reading programs use both the phonics and whole word method, the key question for parents is not about methods but about results. How can parents recognize a reading problem in their own child? I asked Dr. Jeanne Chall, whose name has come up several times during this program, how parents can tell if their child is having trouble learning to read.

JEANNE CHALL'S VIEWS

JC: I have a very strong feeling, mostly because of the work I have done with children who have difficulty, that the parent usually knows and the child also knows when he is having difficulty or she is having difficulty. The child will make mistakes when he reads out loud. He will misread signs or labels, and that's a pretty good indication. I don't think the parent has to know very much more.

M: Do you have any advice for parents who feel that thier child is not mastering reading or is not interested in reading?

JC: I think the first thing the parent should do is go to the school. Go to the teacher and the school and find out why, and what is happening what explanation they have. And then see if the child is having problems, what special help is available in the school. If there is none in the school, if the parent feels he is not getting satisfaction, I think it is important for the parent to say to the school, "I don't agree with you" or "I don't feel the same way." Then take the child for further evaluation. There are universities, colleges, there are hospitals that do diagnosis. Usually it doesn't come to this, but it isn't good for the parent to say "I don't agree with the school" and sit and do nothing. It is important to do things as early as possible, when a problem is suspected. Now with that I also want to say that one should try not to get very anxious about it, because the

child feels it. But if one could take it as a sort of matter of fact thing. It is something to be looked after; it is not something that usually goes away. I think it is so important for parents to have the right attitude with their children and not to get worried. There are people who can help the child. I think that on the whole children today are being taught much better than they were ten years ago.

A REVIEW OF PAST PROGRAMS

(MUSIC)

M: We would like to thank the Electric company and the Children's Television Workshop and Danny Epstein for making the song "Easy Reader" available to "Options on Education." That brings our discussion on Illiteracy to a close. We hope you know more about how reading is taught, and we hope you have a sense of the complexity of the problem. We have learned from this and other "Options on Education" programs that, while programs come to an end when the hour is up, the subject themselves is never fully examined, nor do they stand still. This program on Illiteracy leads, from our perspective at least, toward subsequent programs on standized test and testing and on the consequence of adult illiteracy. How useful are standized test, and is there a trend away from reliance on them? How can illiterate adults be taught to read, and what are the social costs of their not being able to read? We hope those two topics can be the subject of future "Options on Education" programs. I would look back for a few minutes to the first fice programs in this series. There have been some news worthy events, and there are a number of listeners' questions that ought to be answered. In the next few minutes I will be giving you several addresses, so I hope you have a pencil handy. Our first program, on "The Privacy of School Records" took a careful look at what is in school records and who has access to them. It is a tricky issue, we concluded. School records ought to be opened to parents, and they ought to be reviewed and house-cleaned periodically, but there is a danger that recalcitrant school districts might use the Privacy issue to delay or avoid desegregation. There is also a risk of making teachers afraid of putting anything at all in writing. One of the guests on that program was William Rioux. He is co-author of the best single source on school records, a book called Children, Parents and School Records. It costs $3.50 from the National Committee for Citizens in Education, Suite 410 Wild Lake Village Green, Columbia, Maryland 21044. On the program we discussed an amendment to HR 69, the renewal of The Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The amendment, commonly called Buckley Amendment after the New York Senator who introduced it, was strengthened in the House-Senate Conference, passed by the full Congress, and signed by into law by the President. The new law is this: 1. Schools that prevent parents from seeing their child's records are liable to lose their federal funds; and 2: Schools cannot allow third party access to individual records in most cases, without written consent of the parents or the student who is eighteen or over. For full information write

the National Committe for Citizens in Education, Suite 410 Wild Lake Village Green, Columbia, Maryland 21044.

Our second program, "Discipline in the Public Schools" examined a clash of generations. Students seeking more freedom generally have the law on their side. School board and parents, on the other hand, control the purse strings. Schools are caught somewhere in the middle. On that program Dr. George Gallup provided a preview of his sixth annual poll on Public Attitudes toward Education. The poll has now been published in the September issue of Phi Delta Kappan. The magazine is available for $1.00 form Phi Delta Kappan, 8th and Union Street, Bloomington, Indiana 47401. On that same program we took a close look at the discipline situation in Prince George's County, Maryland. Where there were more than 14,000 suspensions last year. Prince George's County has 152,000 students. We found the school board there close to adopting a strict discipline code. The board voted to distribute the proposed code which ennumerated 28 suspendable offenses throughout the county and to seek citizen reaction. Recently the board adopted a modified code by a unanimous vote. The modified code is likely to cut down on suspensions, because it does not allow suspension for truancy tardiness or cutting of classes. These accounted for about one third of suspensions last year. On the discipline program I referred to an article by the late Ernest T. Ladd. The article is printed in April, 1974, issue of The Journal of Law and Education. Joel Berke helped explain the in and outs of "Paying for Public Schools" on our third and fourth programs. He has written a book on the subject. It is called Answers to Inequity. "Pushout: The Public School: New Outcast" was our most recent broadcast. If you heard the program, you know pushouts are kids, almost always from a minority group, who are being forced out of school by the discriminatory school procedures or by insensitive school personnel. The program prompted a letter of praise from Representative Shirley Chisholm of New York, whose House Subcommittee recently held hearings on the Pushout problem. On the pushout program, Peter Holmes, Director for the Office for Civil Rights in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, said that his office was undertaking a pilot review of the situation in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, to determine whether a Pushout problem exists there. Recently however the Anne Arundel County school system decided it would not cooperate with investigation. Their refusal could lead to cut off of more than seven million dollars of federal aid to the schools.

The two books mentioned early on this program are Learning to Read, The Great Debate by Jeanne Chall and Why Johnny Can't Read by Rudolph Flesch. Both are available in paperback.

In all we have received several hundred letters from 39 states, the District of Columbia and Canada. If you want to send us

your suggestion for future programs, or if you want a transcript of this program on Illiteracy, write to "Options on Education" Room 310, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 For "Options on Education" I'm John Merrow. This program was produced by Midge Hart and John Merrow. Funds for this program were made available by the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University and The Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

(MUSIC)

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